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ABSTRACT

At the heart of the controversy over market-driven continuing education programs is the issue of whether they are necessarily antithetical to the principles and philosophy of adult learning. Opponents identify the following problems of market-driven programs: they perpetuate inequality by neglecting needs of those less able to pay; they may meet individual needs efficiently but not overarching social needs; and they often displace educational benefit with profit as an overriding goal. Continuing educators are confronted with such ethical issues as retaining students to keep classes full and educator or institutional values clashing with those of clients. Market-driven programs are supported by the argument that providers must be flexible and responsive to consumer needs in the changing work environment. The controversy boils down to three issues: who the market is, whether the mission of higher education will change in the face of changes in its environment, and how continuing education is viewed within the institution. Some educators have attempted to reframe and resolve the issues by advocating the societal marketing concept that focuses on the needs and wants of individuals and society or by suggesting that the inherent inequality of market-driven systems could be addressed by public subsidy. A market orientation is necessary for institutions to respond to changes in their environment but it should be tempered with the social conscience that balances the profit motive with an ethical, responsible approach. (Contains 16 references.) (YLB)

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Myths and REALITIES

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS - 1966-1996

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Sandra Kerka 1996

Continuing Education: Market Driven or Learner Centered?

One enduring controversy in continuing education is whether programs should be market driven. The controversy has some connection with the pervasive image of the marginality of continuing education in higher education as well as the concept that continuing education programs must be self-sustaining. As Edelson (1991) says, "This principle of having to pay its own way is the single most distinguishing feature of American continuing education today" (p. 19), adding that adult education is the most blatantly market-driven segment of education. At the heart of the controversy is the issue of whether "market driven" is necessarily antithetical to the principles and philosophy of adult learning. This publication looks at whether this is a misconception or a reality.

The Case against Market Driven

According to Beder (1992), successful market-driven programs must have "sufficient numbers of voluntary adult learners who are motivated to exchange enough of their time and money to yield the clients and fee income" needed to operate programs (p. 70). This need to target areas of high demand leads to what Beder sees as the primary problems of market-driven systems: (1) they perpetuate inequality by neglecting the needs of those less able to pay; (2) they may meet individual needs efficiently but not overarching social needs; and (3) they often displace educational benefit with profit as an overriding goal. Rittenburg (1984) agrees that the demands of the marketplace are not a sufficient foundation for continuing education: "The nature of aesthetic and ideological products is such that production to meet consumer demand is not an adequate framework" (p. 22) because such products have intrinsic value.

Controversy over a market orientation for adult education programs is not a new issue. Edelson (1991) reviews the history of the Ford Foundation/Fund for Adult Education's Test Cities Project (1951-61), which sought to demonstrate that noncredit liberal adult education could and should pay for itself. Over time, this obsession with economic viability led to the sacrifice of small-group discussion forums to the need for economies of scale and formats that produced higher revenues (such as large lectures). The controversy crosses many fields. In social work, Laufer and Shannon (1993) describe how program quality, which requires long-term investment in lieu of short-term profit, can suffer when programs must pay as they go. They argue that quality should be "the bottom line below the bottom line" (p. 271).

Ethical issues also arise when self-sufficiency or market demand drives programs. Lawler (1996) presents a number of ethical dilemmas confronting continuing educators: (1) students being retained merely in order to keep classes full; (2) values of the educator or institution clashing with those of paying clients; and (3) advertising that is slightly misleading in order to attract enrollment. Continuing medical education is faced with the issue of whether it is ethically acceptable to use money from the medical industry (e.g., pharmaceutical companies) to fund programs. (Harper 1994). Sork and Welock (1992) express concern that unethical practice is encouraged when financial rewards go to programs low in substance.

The Other Side of the Fence?

Market-driven programs are supported by Long (1990), Mason (1992), Simerly (1991), and Simpson (1996), who argue that higher education, including continuing education, must make a fundamental shift in orientation and values in order to remain viable into the next century. As the demand for continuing education has expanded into the workplace and the changing environment requires recurrent education, "societal pressure for these programs is so great that if it is not met by institutions of higher learning, it will be satisfied outside of them" (Long 1990, p. 107). Providers that are not perceived to be flexible and responsive to consumer needs will not long survive.

Those in favor of a market orientation suggest that opposition may stem from a stereotype of marketing as selling and promotion (Mason 1992). Draves (1990) describes marketing as "a positive two-way communication process with our learners" (p. 6), and proponents see it as highly consumer (learner) oriented, involving needs assessment, demographic research, and attention to customer service. Long (1990) faults higher education for a discrepancy between what adults want to learn and what colleges want to teach. She states that the traditional academic disdain for the marketplace may mean that the best interests of lifelong learners are not being served.

Asserting that continuing education is "big business," Simerly (1991) urges the development of a dynamic, rapid-response organizational culture and a comprehensive client service orientation, as well as an organizational value system that supports and encourages ethical behavior. Simpson (1996) believes that the "demands of the marketplace will require an assimilation of the continuing education entrepreneurial ethic and programming philosophy within the mainstream . . . rendering moot the issue of marginality" (p. 27). Stern (1992) sees social activism as a philosophy for adult education, entrepreneurship as a skill that enables its expression.

On the Side of the Learner

Although there are some real concerns about unethical practice and profit orientation, the controversy boils down to this: (1) who the "market" is (all stakeholders, including both individuals and society?); (2) whether the mission of higher education can and will change in the face of changes in its environment; and (3) how continuing education is viewed within the institution—as a "cash cow" or as a flexible, responsive, consumer-oriented service. What follows are some ways to reframe and possibly resolve the issues.

Rittenburg (1984) advocates the societal marketing concept, which focuses on the needs and wants of both individual consumers and of society, taking into account all stakeholders affected by the marketing exchange by seeking a balance between individual consumer satisfaction and overall quality of life. Daloz (1990), believing that most continuing education programs are or ought to be essentially demand driven, proposes that educators ask these questions of their programs: (1) what difference they make in the big picture; (2) whether they encourage learners to think critically; (3) whether they incorporate multiple perspectives; and (4) whether learners leave the program changed. Harper (1994) suggests consideration of such ethical principles as beneficence (prevention of harm) and justice (fair allocation of societal resources). Kreitlow (1990) remarks that there is a great difference among marketing that is selling, marketing that is telling, and marketing that encourages individual choice and learning.

Beder (1992) suggests that the inherent inequality of market-driven systems could be addressed by public subsidy for programs targeted to disadvantaged groups. He advocates a code of ethics to regulate the tendency to maximize profit over learning needs and to ensure truthful advertising. He also wants educators to recognize who benefits from continuing education: if individuals, then they should pay; if organizations, they should subsidize it; if society, then public subsidy is warranted. He considers market-driven programs justified only when individuals benefit. However, if "market" is defined as various stakeholders including employers and society, then all three situations could be considered market driven.

For Mason (1992) market-driven programs *are* learner centered, and the most successful ones assess learner needs, conduct market research, and are planned with the participatory involvement of the stakeholders affected by the learning experience. Guinsburg (1996) reminds educators that, although market-oriented programs are often judged by a standard of efficiency (maximum output for input), those standards must also lead to effectiveness in learning outcomes. Over and above efficiency and effectiveness is ethical practice, including such principles as collaboration, not competition, because competition impedes best service to the learner; and integrity, keeping faith with the constituency and not selling continuing education like a hot dog vendor. Programs will attract paying customers with value-added, high-quality, creative programs that meet real needs.

The misconceptions that both sides may have—that market-driven advocates have dollar signs in their eyes or that opponents are ivory tower elitists—should give way to the realization that both perspectives are needed. As Stern (1992) puts it, "without social activism, we lose our souls, without entrepreneurship we lose our jobs" (p. 22). A market orientation is necessary in order for institutions to respond to the massive changes in their environment, but it should be tempered with the social conscience that balances the profit motive with an ethical, responsible approach.

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